

Cambodia and the Image of Plural Asias

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Having had a painful legacy of civil war, Cambodian people suffered too much from mental, socio-economic, and environmental predicament. After the genocidal regime which killed almost two million innocent people and the prolonged civil war, Cambodia has suffered too much. When the war eventually ended in 1999, the political crisis between rival parties enriched mistrust among people. Corruption, nepotism, and factionalism are the result of the war and its consequences, and they have distracted people from caring about others and understanding the rest of the world. People are trying just to make ends meet. They do not pay any attention to other businesses. Some non-governmental organizations along with individuals try to heal these mental dilemmas—cultural, socio-economic, and environmental indifferences. Nevertheless, the efforts are not satisfied due to bitterly historic experiences.

Most of us only care about living conditions that are so harsh. This hardship in daily lives deprives us from thinking about the disparity of culture and mutual understanding. The conflict is periodically occurred by the lack of mutual respect and understanding among people in the community. Selfishness is surprisingly increased. Greed is relatively adherent to our mind. Environmental protection is flatly ignored. As a result, social chaos and conflict start to inflict their effects on our community.

Some intellectuals have been trying to restore the plight. Hopefully, these quandaries will be gradually reduced because of their efforts. SeeChange International Cambodia which I work for is one of the mindset civil societies. It helps young adults in the community to change what they might have been inevitably influenced from their parents who suffered enormously from unpleasant experiences in the past war and its consequences. We are educating and empowering them with sustainable future jobs. In terms of mindset, we believe that well-behaved manner toward mutual respect is not only for people in the community but also for those in neighboring countries or other Asian nations as well.

Cambodia is a predominantly agrarian country with arable land covering almost 21% (or 3.7 million hectares) of the 18.1 million hectares in Cambodia. In per capita terms, this is 0.25 hectares of arable land per person. In 2010, 77.2% of the population lived in rural areas with the vast majority of citizens depending on land and natural resources, such as forests and fisheries, to sustain their livelihoods. In rural Cambodia, land is also deeply connected to the cultural and spiritual life of indigenous and nonindigenous communities.¹ Since the last decade, as the price of land has risen, disputes over landownership have occurred among the people in

¹ Land Dispute Resolution Mechanisms in Cambodia by Parliamentary Institute of Cambodia 2016.

villages. There is a trend of land disputes escalating into violence involving citizens, government authorities, and private companies who are granted land concessions for agricultural business. Although the government has tried to reconstruct and improve land management since 1989, there have been problems with both the legal system and the implementation of laws.² Like other communities across the country, Kampong Thom has encountered tremendous problems with land dispute that causes social chaos.

In the meantime, farmers want to increase the price of the produce. However, the middlemen would reject under the pretext of high price of transportation and corruption in the business. Conflicts apparently occur due to disagreement. Last year farmers started to pour their produce down the road due to low price so that they blocked the road to bar middlemen and local authorities from the communities.³ Violence nearly broke. Tension beefed up between them. Most farmers were in debt to the micro-finance institutions. They needed money to run the farms but got less which was unbalance. As a result, they sent their children abroad, young men in particular, to work as laborers mainly in Thailand as illegal and seasonal workers, which seemed taking too much risk. Most importantly, while the people left the communities to work abroad, leaving behind old people and their small kids at home, and their farm lands unproductive, those lands became vulnerable to being grabbed by middlemen and micro-finance as the result of debt.

Some stakeholders in the communities are having problems with one another. However, the most vulnerable ones are young generations who are responsible for these consequences. Those stakeholders are villagers, the local communities, the middlemen, CAT, SeeChange, microfinance institutions, and NGOs. Villagers or mostly farmers tend to have trouble with the middlemen. Farmers want to sell their produce with more reasonable price. However, the businessmen want to lower the price. Conflicts appear, mistrust leads to disbelief, and eventually violence breaks. The local authorities take a few measures to assist the farmers. Instead they are accused of being collided with those businessmen or some kind of taking bribe. It takes months to resolve these problems. Some communities, violence broke due to disbelief and distrust between them. Hence, a few farmers were brought to court and put behind bar as a result.

Having this disbelief and neglect, farmers started to lose hope to gain benefit back from the government. This dilemma is being taken deep root from the Khmer Rough genocidal regime and the prolonged civil war. The farmers as parents do not want their young, daughters in particular, to leave the house because they think that it is too dangerous to them as a girl to

² Ibid.

³ Khmer Language newspaper, *Koh Santepheap Daily*, 2017.

study or work in the city. Those young girls are kept in and carefully monitored after leaving schools. Sooner or later they are forced to marry at a very young age.

In the recent trend, young men in particular tend to migrate to neighboring Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and even further to Japan, South Korea, and Saudi Arabia to seek more opportunities as laborers. Those young people do not even know the cultures of those countries they might live and work in. Hence, some of them encounter culture shock and misunderstanding. Most importantly, they might be trapped into human exploitation or trafficking.

SeeChange International Cambodia is a nongovernmental organization,⁴ which strongly determines to improve young adults' mindset and assist them with various vocational trainings. The organization's vocational training center focuses on courses that will enable people to have better job opportunities. It is empowering them to have a more sustainable work future and connecting them to possible job opportunities, further study, partner organizations and other support options on an individual basis. In addition, the organization offers career advice support.

Cashew Nut Association Kampong Thom (CAT) is a commercial association working in cooperation with the provincial department of commerce. Its duty is to train members in cashew nut communities in the province including five districts. The main responsibilities are to train cashew nut farmers how to graft, layer, coppice, pollard and to apply fertilizer. Generally, there is an outreach service in each community. Nonetheless, people in the communities encounter the same problem, which is a limited knowledge of farming. We have been passing the obsolete methods from generation to generation. In the context of climate change, we are facing too many unprecedented challenges emerging on our farm such as the increase of insects and less productive cultivation that we cannot identify. Last but not least, CAT is also responsible for searching for new markets to sell our harvest. Recently, CAT has worked cooperatively with the Kampong Thom Provincial Department of Commerce to increase the sale of cashew nut product.

In cooperation with SeeChange International Cambodia, CAT has been working with their members mostly farmers and middlemen to find suitable solutions to develop their communities. We are helping farmers through training to get better crop to cope with climate change and to consult about financial support. More farmers are interested in the program but they have to abide by one condition—bring their young children back to school or vocational training center which is working closely with us. Responsibilities such as providing legal service whenever they have a problem with land grabbing fall upon civil rights groups working in this field.

Kampong Thom, partly my community, needs changing due to obsolete way of governance and leadership. The challenge that I encounter is absolutely huge—the conservative ideology, which

⁴ SeeChange International Cambodia's vision.

people do not want to change. I do not want to confront cultural, racial, and socio-economic differences directly. The biggest challenge I have ever seen is the mistrust between Cambodia and its neighboring countries. We think that we are inferior and the neighboring countries are cheating and exploiting due to our experience of the bitter past. In terms of agriculture, Cambodians believe that the produce from Thailand and Vietnam is full of toxic chemical used in the agriculture. Hence, most Cambodians tend to organic matter and home-grown vegetables. Nonetheless, the growth of tourism industry demands more food. Thus, Cambodia needs to import more food and vegetables from those countries that can inevitably dismay Cambodian farmers with both quality and quantity; the farmers think that the imported produce destroys domestic product which is better in quality.

In terms of the idea of plural Asias, Cambodia has little knowledge about this new trend. However, I find it important to know about the trend of population growing and economic growth in Asia, such as India, Japan, and China. The aging will definitely affect Japan and China but not India in the next 30 years. Strong leadership from these countries will contribute to instant and stable economic growth. However, the nationalism will also curb the integration among Asian nations. Of course, the sense of nationalism may cause fundamentalism, and disputes over sharing natural resources will also cause unrest in the region. Mekong River Commission (MRC), for instance, is in trouble with dam projects between the upper stream and downstream countries, so the conflict of interest among those countries in Asia is still a big challenge, and “plural Asias” is hard to achieve. Stronger one like China wants to control Asia by using economic influences. India is trying to reduce Chinification in some parts of Asia such as Southeast Asian countries by playing an active role to compete with China since China has a conflict with the MRC countries.

The authoritarians have come back to Asia due to the populism. However, Asians are getting richer and richer, and the size of the middle class has increased. They tend to moral politics. The corrupt politicians are trying to change tactics to gain more votes from people to secure their power. Asia context in the contemporary time is the rise of authoritarians as seen in Cambodia, Thailand, the Philippines, China, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The populism method used in the Philippines was successful by a few presidents including the incumbent Duterte who uses war on drugs to kill people, and most people in the country still support him. This is a hard time to enrich the image of “plural Asias” due to the fundamentalism from those authoritarian leaders. China helps those authoritarians and harm democracy in the region. Cambodia's democracy, for instance, is so sensitive and fragile due to the involvement of China. We need help from international communities to maintain democracy and the rule of law by putting pressure on the leaders responsible for violating the principle of democracy.

The region's economic rise, a corresponding expansion in education, and the emergence of middle class tend to make people forget the past experience. The neglect of education curriculum to integrate history in museum should not be overlooked and young generation should be able to keep track of the horrible lesson. Historic buildings must be preserved in fervor for educational purposes. By accepting the historical fact, we must reveal that history is something to learn about, not to enrich ultra-nationalism. We must learn from the past for a better future. The killing field museum, S21, is something to learn about because this museum can help lead people to social justice. Cambodia has successfully overcome the post conflict reconciliation and transitional justice by keeping historic buildings as the symbols of peace building and living harmoniously. Every country has to accept the historical fact so that there will not be politically-motivated history to extort facts and to cause hatred among Asian nations.